DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 110 527 UD 015 270

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TITLE The Poor Vs. the Non-Poor: An Ethnic and Metropolitan-Nonmetropolitan Comparison.
SPONS AGENCY Texas A and M Univ., College Station. Texas Agricultural Experiment Station.
PUB DATE Aug 74
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (August 26-29, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Factors; *Cultural Traits; Economic Disadvantagement; *Economic Factors; *Ethnic Groups; Family Characteristics; Geographic Location; Intergroup Relations; *National Surveys; Negroes; Racial Differences; *Rural Urban Differences; Social Differences

ABSTRACT

The stated purpose of this paper is to summarize findings from survey data which tap approximately 30 of the so-called "poverty traits." The data were collected in 1970-71 from both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan families, varying in income and ethnic background, and living in widely different parts of the U.S. Twenty-nine poverty traits searched for are presented under four headings: (1) relationship of subculture to larger society; (2) nature of local slum community; (3) nature of family; and (4) attitudes, values, and character of the individual. It is stated that in order to summarize a rather large amount of data, the paper focuses on significant differences which were found between economically poor and nonpoor families in each of the six ethnic/residence categories. It was found that significant differences between poor and nonpoor in the two Spanish-speaking groups existed on considerably fewer traits than in the case of black or white respondent groups. Significant differences between poor and nonmetropolitan whites were found on a smaller number of 11 traits among both the nonmetropolitan blacks and the metropolitan whites studied. (Author/JM)

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THE POOR VS. THE NON-POOR: AN ETHNIC AND METROPOLITAN-NONMETROPOLITAN COMPARISON*

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A paper prepared for presentation at the 69th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, August 26-29, 1974.

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* The research reported was supported in part by Texas Agricultural Experiment Station project H-2906.

THE POOR VS. THE NON-POOR:
AN ETHNIC AND METROPOLITAN-NONMETROPOLITAN COMPARISON

The purpose of this paper is to summarize findings from survey data which tap approximately thirty of the so-called "poverty traits" identified by Oscar Lewis. The data were collected in 1970-71 from both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan families, varying in ethnic background and living in widely different parts of the U.S.

"HOW DIFFERENT ARE THE POOR?": AN UNANSWERED QUESTION

After intensively studying impoverished families in Mexico and Puerto Rico, Oscar Lewis identified about sixty characteristics comprising what he termed the "culture of poverty." Among social scientists, the culture of poverty notion has subsequently given rise to much controversy (see, for example, the extended discussion by Valentine et al. in Current Anthropology, 1969:181-201). Leaving aside questions concerning the appropriateness of Lewis' cultural (subcultural) conceptualization, the poverty characteristics listed by Lewis have not been sufficiently evaluated. As Irelan et al.(1969:405) observe, "the phrase 'culture of poverty' has become current before the reality of its referent has been established." Despite Alan Winter's (1971:18) judgment that "the final status of Lewis' hypothesized list and a more definitive description of the life-ways of the poor await further research," there have been few attempts to empirically examine Lewis' alleged poverty traits.[1] Large scale systematic surveys focussing on those at the bottom of the stratification system, which Rossi and Blum advocated in 1968, remain difficult to locate.

The question "How different are the poor?" is far from purely academic. As Miller and Roby (1970:168) have noted, "because of the importance of styles of life in affecting social honor and public policy, social science becomes particularly political. Its mode of interpretation has strong reverberations. Yet, the knowledge from which descriptions and interpretations are made is limited and controversial..."

This paper summarizes findings from an inter-state study of disadvantaged families. The study included a number of measures of characteristics judged to

be relevant to Lewis' alleged poverty traits. Families representing six different ethnic/residence population types are considered in this paper. In order to summarize a rather large amount of data, the paper focuses on significant differences which were found between economically poor and non-poor families in each of the six ethnic/residence categories.

SOURCE OF DATA

The source of data is a study titled "Factors Affecting Patterns of Living Among Disadvantaged Families" (Project NC-90, Cooperative State Research Service, U.S.D.A.). An interdisciplinary research group, of which the author was a member, designed and carried out the study. In addition to securing basic demographic information, the extensive interview schedule developed by this group tapped three main content areas--family resource procurement and expenditure, family social structure and social participation, and homemaker's value-orientations regarding education and employment.

Data-gathering took place in 1970-71. Using a common interview schedule, interviews were conducted by trained female interviewers with the main female homemaker[2] of families residing in the sample areas selected by researchers in each of the thirteen states participating in the study. Sample areas consisted of poverty tracts in metropolitan areas and of low income counties or other civil subdivisions in nonmetropolitan areas. An additional consideration in selection of sample areas was the representation of different ethnic groups. Within sample areas, families selected to be interviewed were required to have a female homemaker under the age of 65 mainly responsible for the household and at least one child under 18 currently living in the home. Approximately 200 interviews were completed in each participating state.

NATURE OF RESPONDENT GROUPS CONSIDERED IN THIS ANALYSIS

Data presented in this paper were obtained from families representing the following six ethnic/residence population types: 1) metropolitan white; 2) nonmetropolitan white; 3) metropolitan black; 4) nonmetropolitan black; 5) metropolitan Spanish-speaking; 6) nonmetropolitan Spanish-speaking.

The metropolitan white sample was drawn from low-income wards of Superior, Wisconsin (part of the Superior-Duluth SMSA). Because no census tract informa-

tion was available on a ward basis to select wards with a high proportion of disadvantaged families, Housing Census information by ward was compared with data from the city assessor's office. The families interviewed resided in eight wards in which one-third or more of the housing units were classified as deteriorating and dilapidated, plus three public low-income housing areas. These residential areas bordered the lake front, where ore and grain docks are prominent; railroad yards; and the downtown area of Superior.

The nonmetropolitan white sample was drawn from low-income minor civil divisions in Vermont. Fifteen minor civil divisions or "towns" in which 34% or more of the families had less than $3000 income (1959) were randomly selected, and interviews were conducted with eligible families within these "towns." Only 17% of the families interviewed lived on farms; the remaining 83% lived in small villages or in the open country and were not engaged in farming.

Both of the black respondent groups resided in Texas. The metropolitan black sample was drawn from the 5th ward in the downtown section of Houston, which encompasses two poverty tracts. A low-income apartment complex and a few single family dwellings are found in this ward, but the dominant feature is cramped row housing extending in several directions.

The nonmetropolitan black sample was drawn from a town of 4900 and two nearby rural villages in a low-income county in East Texas. The county has a higher proportion of blacks and a substantially lower median income than the state of Texas generally and was purposely selected for these reasons. The town and villages in which interviewing was conducted are located approximately sixty miles from the nearest metropolitan center. Lumber and poultry-processing plants are the major industries in the area.

The metropolitan Spanish-speaking sample resided in poverty tracts of East Chicago, Indiana (part of the Gary-Hammond-East Chicago SMSA). Persons of both Mexican-American and Puerto Rican background are represented in this group.

The nonmetropolitan Spanish-speaking sample consists of migrant labor families, interviewed while they were employed at twelve state-owned labor camps in the vicinity of Davis, California. Such camps yearly house about one-fifth of the agricultural workers and families in California, thus representing a large low-income population for potential study. In addition, access to state-

owned camps is considerably easier than access to camps owned and operated by the farmers themselves. Families who were interviewed identified themselves as both Mexican-Americans and Mexican nationals, but their common migrant status is viewed as the more socially meaningful for the variables investigated here.

All families interviewed met the criteria of having 1) a female homemaker under the age of 65 and 2) at least one child in the household under the age of 18. However, the six respondent groups described above were not selected by uniform sampling methods. Procedures for a standard area sample were followed for the two white groups. The metropolitan Spanish-speaking group was obtained from an area sample of East Chicago poverty tracts which also yielded black and white families; thus, this group is not as representative of Spanish-speaking families as it would have been if only Spanish-speaking neighborhoods had been sampled. Finally, the two black respondent groups and the nonmetropolitan Spanish-speaking group (migrants) all constitute purposive samples.

It should also be noted that all respondent groups were drawn from geographic units identified as generally low-income or similarly disadvantaged. Although individual families within these units might vary in economic resources, "non-poor" as well as poor shared disadvantages associated with living in poverty census tracts or low-income nonmetropolitan areas.

METHOD

Identification of Families' Income Adequacy (the independent variable)

An income index score for each family was derived by dividing the family's total disposable income for the past year by an appropriate poverty threshold.[3] Families were classified as poor if total family income was less than the government-designated poverty threshold for a family of that composition and place of residence in the year the data were collected, i.e. index score below 100. An index score below 100 means that a family is in rather dire circumstances, regardless of how much below 100 it is. Families termed "non-poor" are those having an income index score of 150 or more. It is recognized that there may well be other meaningful dimensions besides income which would yield a different categorization of poor and non-poor families.[4]

For the purposes of this paper, families with income index scores of 100 to 149 are excluded in order to more clearly isolate and describe fami-

lies which are poor and non-poor in terms of an income index. Unfortunately, exclusion of these families markedly reduced the number of non-poor families among the two Spanish-speaking groups. Resulting N's for poor and non-poor in the six respondent groups are shown in Table 1.

Selection of Poverty Trait Indicators (the dependent variables)

Table 2 shows the indicators which were investigated for specified poverty traits. These indicators were judged by the researcher to be relevant to specified traits. For some traits--such as unemployment, low level of education, crowding--the connection between indicator and trait is obvious. In other cases, such as "constant struggle for survival," the trait could be measured by various indicators, and the particular indicator was judged to be one reasonable measure of the trait. Because determining appropriate indicators for traits relating to the family and the individual is considerably more difficult than it is for traits relating to the slum community and linkage of poverty culture to the larger society, indicators selected for family and individual traits require further comment.

A. Indicators of Family Traits

It is not clear what Lewis means by "trend toward female- or mother-centered families." Thus, the indicator selected is simply the percentage of families in which the homemaker identified herself as family head. It is also difficult to interpret the meaning of "predominance of the nuclear family."[5] Again, a simple measure is used here: the percentage of families of nuclear type--i.e. families that consist of husband, wife, and their immediate children.

According to Oscar Lewis, among families sharing the culture of poverty, there is much verbal emphasis on the importance of family solidarity, but the latter is in fact an ideal rarely achieved. An indicator of family cohesiveness was available in the form of an index based on the homemaker's report of the frequency of the family's joint participation in various activities. Such a measure undoubtedly suffers from a social desirability bias in response. The majority of both poor and nonpoor families were classified as having medium or high cohesiveness by this index. Thus, percentage of poor and non-poor families demonstrating high cohesiveness was compared, with poor families expected to demonstrate high cohesiveness less frequently.

Another family-related poverty trait is supposedly the "absence of childhood as a specially prolonged and protected stage in the life cycle." An indirect measure of this trait is the homemaker's attitude toward a child's quitting school and helping out for a while if the family needs more money. A parent who agrees that a child "should" do this would seem to have low concern about prolonging for the child the relatively responsibility-free status of student.

Lewis also maintains that part of the culture of poverty is a "strong predisposition to authoritarianism" within the context of the family. Assuming that this authoritarianism includes an emphasis on parental dominance and corresponding behavior compliance on the part of children, a series of five items was used to investigate such an orientation toward the parent-child relationship.

B. Indicators of Individual Attitude Traits

All indicators used to measure attitudes of the individual are Likert-type statements with which the homemaker expressed degree of agreement/disagreement. Some of the statements, such as the indicator for martyr complex among women, were judged to be related to the alleged trait on the basis of face validity. The research findings of Cohen and Hodges (1963) are cited in support of the following indicators:

(1) Re existing institutions...: "When a child has problems there is no use getting in touch with the school because they aren't really interested." Cohen and Hodges (1963:323) report that "LL's, more than members of any other stratum, are cynical and distrustful..." The indicator reflects this feeling as it is directed toward one aspect of the existing power structure.

(2) Re helplessness: "It makes no difference which job you take because you are likely to get laid off anyway." Cohen and Hodges (1963:322) report that LL's are convinced that "in all probability...things will turn out badly as they generally have in the past." The indicator conveys a sense of helplessness, specifically related to employment opportunity, stemming from this conviction.

(3) Re resignation and fatalism: "Some people just cannot finish high school so why try"; "Few people really look forward to their work." There is no question that feelings of helplessness, resignation and fatalism are closely related. While the indicator of helplessness (above) conveys frustration, this feeling does not have the degree of finality which resignation and fatalism have.

The two indicators of resignation and fatalism convey a sense of being resigned to the inevitable, for which no particular external force can be blamed.

(4) Re dependence: "In getting a job it is not what you know but who you know." Cohen and Hodges report that LL's frequently view "friends or connections" as essential to economic and occupational success. The indicator conveys a belief in the importance of, and hence dependence on, such connections.

(5) Re powerlessness: "The most important thing about getting a job is being at the right place at the right time." The feelings of powerlessness and dependence are difficult to separate. Dependence is interpreted here as specific, i.e. tied to another individual or set of individuals, while powerlessness is seen as more diffuse. Cohen and Hodges note the frequent alluding by LL persons to the role of "luck or chance" in their lives. The indicator reflects the feeling that one's destiny is controlled by impersonal forces.

(6) Re male superiority: "The man should be the one to make all the decisions about choosing his job." Cohen and Hodges found that LL persons are more likely than higher strata to agree that men should make the really important decisions in the family.

Statistical Evaluation of Data

It was first necessary to determine the percentage of poor and non-poor families demonstrating each poverty trait indicator. Incidence of poverty trait indicators among poor families could not be compared across ethnic/residence types because of the variation in sampling methods described earlier. The analysis reported here therefore compares poor and non-poor within respondent groups. In each of the six respondent groups, the percentage of poor and non-poor families characterized by each poverty trait indicator was compared to see if these percentages differed significantly. In each case a one-tailed normal approximation test was used since a higher percentage of poor than non-poor was expected to be characterized by each indicator (except high family cohesiveness, which was expected to characterize fewer poor than non-poor families).

Poverty traits and specific indicators for which significant differences were found are shown in Table 3.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Indicators of twenty-nine poverty traits identified by Oscar Lewis were investigated in this study. For twenty-four traits, a significant difference (in the predicted direction) was found between poor and non-poor families in at least one respondent group.

A considerably more varied and extensive set of poverty traits identified by Lewis has been investigated in this study than was investigated in the Irelan et al.(1969) study. (The latter compared the incidence of eight value-orientations among Anglo-American poor, Negro-American poor, and Spanish-speaking-American poor.) Because not quite half of the traits identified by Lewis have been examined here, however, the present data are not sufficiently inclusive to permit a judgment concerning the general empirical validity of Lewis' portrait of the so-called culture of poverty.

It is also impossible to say that the present data provide a test of Lewis' cross-cultural hypothesis, i.e. the assumption that "very poor people from groups characterized by different major cultures are markedly similar to each other in certain attitudes, values, and patterns of behavior" (Irelan et al.,1969:406). The present data do permit inferences about the generalizability of the traits examined. However, sampling inconsistencies preclude a direct test of the hypothesis. It should also be noted that testing this hypothesis is difficult even with adequate samples because no guidelines are given by Lewis for determining the specific level of a trait that differentiates poor from non-poor. For example, to what extent and in what ways is "belief in male superiority" different among poor and non-poor?

Having emphasized what cannot be said on the basis of the present data, what do the findings permit in the way of conclusions? It was argued at the outset that "life-ways" assumed to be distinctive among the poor have not been adequately researched. The findings of this study suggest that the following alleged poverty characteristics are not distinctive characteristics of the poor (i.e. the poor and non-poor did not differ significantly on these characteristics): working women; lack of labor union membership; lack of participation in Social Security; borrowing from finance companies; lack of participation in church, church-related groups, community groups, and lodges; absence of childhood as a specially prolonged and protected stage in the life cycle; authoritarian orien-

tation with respect to early weaning, frequent spanking, and importance of respect for parents; and belief in male superiority as reflected in assertion that "it is more important for a boy to get an education beyond high school than for a girl."

It is possible that significant differences on the above characteristics might have been found if poor families had been compared with a more representative sample of non-poor, i.e. families less exposed to influences associated with residence in disadvantaged environments. The fact that the poor and non-poor studied shared these influences, however, make the significant differences which were found even more impressive. Despite whatever "contextual" effect there may have been on the economically non-poor who resided in deprived environments, tending to produce similarities between poor and non-poor, the difference in income adequacy between the two was found to be related to significant differences on a number of characteristics. This would seem to support the view that increasing the economic resources available to the poor will result in a significant change in the life-style of such persons.

For each ethnic/residence respondent group, Table 4 summarizes the number of traits for which significant differences were found between poor and non-poor. It is immediately evident that significant differences between poor and non-poor in the two Spanish-speaking groups existed on considerably fewer traits than in the case of black or white respondent groups. Irelan et al.(1969), similarly, found little difference between the recipients and non-recipients of public assistance among their Spanish-speaking sample, while consistent differences were found between these two sub-sets of their black and white samples. It should be remembered that Lewis based his list of poverty traits on his research in Mexico and Puerto Rico. The findings of the present study support Irelan et al.'s (1969:412) suggestion that "the culture of poverty concept, largely developed through experience with persons of Latin American origin, may have limited utility..."

Significant differences between poor and non-poor were found on fifteen traits among both the metropolitan blacks and the nonmetropolitan whites studied. Significant differences between poor and non-poor were found on a smaller number of traits (eleven) among both the nonmetropolitan blacks and the metropolitan whites studied. Thus, one can speculate that, for the black population, the

metropolitan setting is associated with more distinctive life-ways among the poor. For the white population, on the other hand, the nonmetropolitan setting may be associated with more distinctive life-ways among the poor. This is an intriguing hypothesis for further study.

Oscar Lewis' list of poverty traits is difficult to empirically examine for several reasons, and hence it is also difficult to test his notion of the cross-cultural nature of these traits. The data reported here hopefully furnish some insights from which future research in this area can benefit.

FOOTNOTES

1. One notable exception is a paper by Irelan et al. (1969).

2. The female's role as "homemaker" did not preclude her holding a job outside the home. The term "homemaker" is used to identify the person "responsible for running the household."

3. This threshold took into account 1) the number and ages of persons in the household; 2) the proportion of the past year that each person resided in the household; 3) the consumer price index for the particular region of the country and metropolitan/nonmetropolitan place of residence; 4) farm vs. nonfarm residence.

4. A number of writers have questioned the appropriateness of the "breaking points" currently used to define poverty status; see Bell (1970), Kershaw (1970), Levine (1970), and Madden (1971).

5. See Leeds (1971:266-268) for a discussion of interpretative problems surrounding these two traits.

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TABLE 1:
Overview of Respondent Groups

Income Index	White		Black		Spanish-speaking	
	Metro.	Non-metro.	Metro.	Non-metro.	Metro.	Non-metro.
Below 100 (N)	53	57	135	97	17	114
150 &above (N)	96	93	74	94	24	11

TABLE 2:
Poverty Traits and Related Indicators

Poverty Traits	Indicators
I. Relationship of subculture to larger society	
Unemployment	Husband currently not employed
Underemployment	Homemaker, if employed, worked less than 26 weeks during past year
Working women	Homemaker currently employed outside home
Miscellany of unskilled occupations	If employed, husband and homemaker hold unskilled jobs
Lack of property ownership	Family does not own home
Do not belong to labor unions	No union dues paid during past year
Do not participate in Social Security	No income from Social Security benefits
Borrowing from local moneylenders...	Payments made on finance company loan
Absence of food reserves in the home	Sometimes or often "do not have enough food to last until there is money to buy more"
Absence of savings	Sometimes or often "not able to save to have something to fall back on"
Chronic shortage of cash	Often "cannot afford to buy new shoes or clothes"
Constant struggle for survival	Family income perceived as "not at all adequate
Low level of education	Homemaker and husband completed less than 8 years of school
II. Nature of local slum community	
Poor housing conditions	Home lacks both hot and cold piped water; home lacks flush toilet; home lacks tub or shower
Crowding	Fewer rooms than persons in home
Minimum of organization beyond level of nuclear and extended family	Lack of voluntary associations: neither husband nor wife attend church, church-connected groups;PTA and community groups; lodge, VFW, etc.; recreation groups Lack of neighboring by homemaker (low score on index measuring frequency of shopping, exchanging favors, and chatting with neighbors) No interaction with friends from work or with other friends, by homemaker and husband

Table 2 (continued)

Poverty Traits	Indicators
III. Nature of Family	
Trend toward female- or mother-centered families	Homemaker is head of family
Predominance of nuclear family	Family consists of husband, wife, children
Family solidarity: an ideal rarely achieved	High score on index of family cohesiveness, indicating that family often goes places together and works around the home together (poor expected to have lower percentage of high scores)
Absence of childhood as a specially prolonged and protected stage in the life cycle	Agreement that "if the family needs more money it is all right for a child to quit school and help out for a while"
Strong predisposition to authoritarianism	Strong agreement that: 1) "Respect for parents is the most important thing kids should learn" 2) "Most kids should be toilet trained by 15 months of age" 3) "Most kids should be spanked more often" 4) "A child should be taken away from the breast or bottle as soon as possible" 5) "The main goal of a parent is to see that the kids stay out of trouble"
IV. Attitudes, Values, and Character of the Individual	
Strong feeling of alienation	Strong agreement that "too many people on the job are just out for themselves and don't really care for anyone else"
Feeling that existing institutions do not serve their interests and needs	Agreement that "when a child has problems there is no use getting in touch with the school because they aren't really interested"
Strong feeling of helplessness	Strong agreement that "it makes no difference which job you take because you are likely to get laid off anyway"
Sense of resignation and fatalism	Agreement that: 1) "Some people just cannot finish high school so why try" 2) "Few people really look forward to their work"
Strong feeling of dependence	Strong agreement that "in getting a job it is not what you know but who you know"
Feeling of powerlessness	Agreement that "the most important thing about getting a job is being at the right place at the right time"

Table 2 (continued)

Poverty Trait	Indicators
Belief in male superiority	Agreement that: 1) "It is more important for a boy to get an education beyond high school than for a girl" 2) "It is all right for women to hold jobs which are usually men's jobs" 3) "The man should be the one to make all the decisions about choosing his job"
Martyr complex among women	Strong agreement that "kids should be nicer than they are to their mothers since their mothers suffer so much for them"

TABLE 3:

Poverty Traits on which Poor and Non-poor Differed Significantly

Poverty Traits	Metro. White	Nonmet. White	Metro. black	Nonmet. black	Metro. Span.-sp.	Nonmet. Span.-sp.
Unemployment			**	**		
Underemployment			*	*		**
Unskilled occupations	*(H)	**(H)	*(W)			*(W)
Lack of property ownership	**					
Absence of food reserves in home	**		**	**		
Absence of savings	**	**	**	**	*	
Chronic shortage of cash	**	**	**	**		
Constant struggle for survival	**	*	**	**		
Low level of education		**(H) *(W)	*(H)	*(H) **(W)		
Poor housing conditions		**		**		*
Crowding	**	**	**	**		
Minimum of organization:						
Voluntary associations (recreational only)				**		
Neighboring		**	*			
Friends from work			*	**		*
Other friends			*		*	
Trend toward female- or mother-centered families	**		**	**		
Predominance of nuclear family						**
Family solidarity: ideal rarely achieved		**	**		**	
Authoritarianism:						
Early toilet training	*	**				
Goal of parent is to keep kids out of trouble	*	**	*			
Alienation			*			
Institutions don't serve needs		*				
Helplessness	*		*			
Resignation, fatalism:						
...can't finish school	*					
...look forward to work		*			*	
Dependence				*		
Powerlessness		**				*
Male superiority						
...O.K. for women to hold men's jobs		**				
...man should make all decisions about his job		**				
Marry: complex among women		**	**			

* denotes significance at .05
**denotes significance at .01

(H)=Husband
(W)=Wife

TABLE 4:

Number of Poverty Traits on which Poor and Non-poor Differed Significantly, by Respondent Group

Respondent Group	Number of Traits on which Significant Differences Found
Nonmetropolitan white	15
Metropolitan black	15
Nonmetropolitan black	11
Metropolitan white	11
Nonmetropolitan Spanish-speaking	5
Metropolitan Spanish-speaking	3